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Iplex Group
of Cos.
since 2013.
Iplex USA LLC photo



CEO of pipe maker Iplex thankful for a loyal team

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When the pandemic struck, pipe manufacturer Iplex Group equipped some of its North American employees to work from home and took steps to protect the health and safety of those at its manufacturing plants and distribution centers.

The Canadian company with a U.S. headquarters, Iplex USA LLC, in Pineville, N.C., also held ongoing mental health and well-being activities and webinars to support employees' physical, social, mental and financial well-being.

If needed, colleagues from various departments and divisions would cover for one another to keep up with North American demand for thermoplastic piping systems for the municipal, irrigation, industrial, plumbing, mechanical, electrical and telecommunication sectors, according to Iplex Group CEO Alex Mestres.

"The care and commitment our employees demonstrated toward each other during the pandemic also extended to our customers," Mestres said in an email. "During these very challenging times, we encountered labor shortages. When this hindered our ability to service our customers, some of our salaried employees volunteered to work shifts in the plants to ensure that the production lines could run."

With an estimated \$900 million in annual sales, Iplex USA/Group is the fifth-largest pipe, profile and tubing extruder in North America, according to *Plastics News*' latest ranking.

Mestres has been CEO of the Iplex Group of Cos. since 2013, stepping into the role with a multipronged goal: rebuilding the leadership team to support a performance-driven organization with a customer-focused strategy to accelerate growth.

During the pandemic, the Iplex organization worked diligently and managed customer expectations "exceedingly well," Mestres said.

"To thank our employees for the care and commitment they have shown, both last summer and this year, we provided all employees with either three additional vacation days or an appreciation bonus," he said.

For Mestres, the pandemic drove home several lessons.

"First, it solidified my belief in the importance of caring for employees and their safety," he said. "While not the intention, it resulted in engagement beyond expectations and allowed us to adapt as an organization in these very uncertain and difficult times."

Then, there were challenges related to staffing, supply chain interruptions and raw material shortages that resulted in significant price increases.

"But treating customers fairly, with full transparency and open communication, resulted in the strengthening of many relationships, even when our supply to them was less than optimal," Mestres said of his second lesson learned.

"And finally, realizing that we could potentially accomplish many of the tasks and business activities remotely and virtually was certainly an eye-opener," he added.

Mestres credits a former boss and mentor for setting an example of how to implement a customer-focused culture in a fast-growing organization.

"Personally, he was empowering, a good listener; he really challenged my thinking, which made me a better leader; and he was always a glass half-full individual," Mestres said.

The CEO has a positive outlook for Iplex, particularly several internal growth initiatives he described as exciting challenges.

"I believe 2022 will be another strong year for our business with solid housing starts and government investments in infrastructure," Mestres said. "But many of the challenges we are facing today related to supply shortages and labor shortages, not to mention the pandemic, will persist at least during the first half of the year."

Mestres began his career in the plastic pipe industry in 1985, shortly after graduating from the mechanical engineering program at Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal. He joined Canron Pipe, which became Iplex after a 1992 merger with Scepter Manufacturing.

At Canron, Mestres worked as a project engineer and then a plant engineer in one of the molding plants. In the late 1990s, company officials saw demand grow for pipe products from big-box retailers catering to the do-it-yourself market.

"When retail powerhouses such as Home Depot and Lowe's were experiencing massive growth, Iplex had to pivot and adapt to the new reality and specific needs of this channel," Mestres said. "I was tasked with the launch of a new division to service the DIY channel, which involved building a new North American retail team and introducing significant changes to our operations and logistics and a very different market approach and strategy."

Later, Mestres faced product commoditization in the industry and the need to launch the organization into innovation mode.

"Determining our objectives and strategic ap-

proach to innovation, defining our value proposition to customers, building our team, and assessing and developing our capabilities, as well as establishing our innovation techniques, systems and processes, was not without its challenges," Mestres said.

However, Iplex employees pulled it off, he added.

"By the mid-2000s, we were being recognized as an innovator in the industry, with a state-of-the-art R&D center that gave rise to significant innovations," Mestres said. "The challenge continues today as innovation is never easy and it's a never-ending process"

Over the years, Mestres said, two pieces of advice have guided him and both are related to leadership.

"You never go wrong by surrounding yourself with employees that are smarter and more skilled than you, who think differently and are not afraid to challenge your views," Mestres said. "And secondly, know that people will not remember you for a great project or a great accomplishment. They will remember you for how you made them feel when you interacted with them."

Mestres also said he would like to be remembered for leaving the Iplex organization stronger than when he became CEO and a place where people can thrive while respecting and supporting each other.

"I also hope that I have been able to solidify an unshakable customer-centric corporate culture for future generations," Mestres said. "And finally, I hope that some of my actions and decisions during my tenure as a CEO have positively affected and improved the lives and careers of a few of my colleagues."



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